

Calvin and Baptism: Baptismal Regeneration or the Duplex Loquendi Modus?

JIM CASSIDY AUGUST 22, 2016 REFORMATION21

I. Introduction

“What is the relation between baptism and salvation in the thought of John Calvin?” This is a timely question, given that there has been much discussion over this very subject of late. On the one hand, there are those who claim that Calvin taught “baptismal regeneration” – at least a form of it. On the other hand are those who insist he taught “presumptive regeneration”¹. It should be born in mind, however, that none of these claimants are writing in an “agenda free” fashion. It seems that across the board, they are reacting against a perceived trend – in both American Protestantism generally and in American Presbyterianism in particular – toward turning the sacrament of baptism into a “bare sign.” It is claimed that baptism is being denigrated into a mere symbol. Consequently, the trend is toward making baptism almost optional in the life and ministry of the church.

As for us, we are sympathetic with such concerns. A marginalization of the sacraments can be sensed in what we might call “broad Evangelicalism”, and perhaps even in some quarters of the Reformed church. What, however, is the proper response to a “low view” of baptism? A “high view” would seem the answer – but how high do we go before running into baptismal regeneration? Does having a “high view” of this sacrament necessarily entail something close to an *ex opere operato* approach to sacramental efficacy? Certainly if Calvin taught baptismal regeneration, this ought to lead us in the direction of answering these questions in the affirmative. Calvin, of course, was not infallible. But he is our teacher as Reformed Christians. And if we wish to retain the distinction of being Reformed, we ought to give Calvin – of all people – a serious hearing.

In the spirit of such a serious hearing, the position of this essay is that Calvin did not teach what we commonly call “baptismal regeneration”. Thus, adhering to a “bare sign” low view of baptism is not the only means of breeching faith with the Reformed tradition; going to the opposite extreme and holding to anything akin to “baptismal regeneration” is equally unfaithful. In contrast to both these poles, Calvin’s view might be summed up by the term “baptismal efficacy”. In other words:

for Calvin, baptism is a means of grace. According to the Reformers there were three means of grace in the church: Word, sacrament, and prayer. And these three means become effectual in a qualified sense. And that qualified sense is this: they are efficacious only in the lives of the elect when they are received by faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, for Calvin there is no automatic *ex opere operato* connection between the means of grace and the person receiving them. Grace is not communicated automatically, in a mechanical fashion, to the person receiving its means. This is not what it means to say the sacraments are “effectual”. Instead, the term “means of grace” denotes the earthly and human way through which the Holy Spirit ordinarily communicates grace to the believer.

II. Baptism As Means of Grace

Calvin’s teaching on how the preached Word is a means of grace parallels how the sacraments in general – particularly baptism – are effectual. Like the preached Word, baptism is also a means of grace. And as such it communicates grace. It confers that which it signs and seals: adoption, regeneration, and the washing away of sins². Not, of course, in an automatic or *ex opere operato* fashion; but with – and only with – the below mentioned qualifications.

Firstly, baptism is a means of grace, by conferring what it seals and signifies, only for the elect. What Calvin says about the sacraments in general is also true of baptism in particular:

“The Holy Spirit, whom the sacraments do not bring promiscuously to all, but whom the Lord specially confers on his people, brings the gifts of God along with him, makes way for the sacraments, and causes them to bear fruit.”³

Many a reprobate receive the sacrament of baptism. But in such instances it is far from being a means of grace. In fact, it is a means of judgment. This is not to say, however, that it does not provide some external and outward benefit to the reprobate persons. It does in some ways. It initiates them into the life of the church. And there they receive many benefits due to the “common operations of the Holy Spirit”⁴. To them are given the oracles and ordinances of God, for even the reprobate are “those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.” ([Hebrews 6:4-5](#)). But, and this is all important, these are not eternal and internal operations of the Holy Spirit that accompany salvation. Rather, they are the common works of the Spirit given to all those in the field, whether tares or wheat.

Secondly, baptism confers what it signs and signifies by faith. Calvin argues:

“Therefore, let it be regarded as a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace. But they avail and profit nothing unless received in faith.”⁵

And then later on he reiterates:

“Let us take as proof of this, Cornelius the centurion, who, having already received forgiveness of sins and the visible graces of the Holy Spirit, was nevertheless baptized. He did not seek an ampler forgiveness of sins through baptism, but a surer exercise of faith — indeed, increase of assurance from a pledge. Perhaps someone will object: why, then, did Ananias tell Paul to wash away his sins through baptism if sins are not washed away by the power of baptism itself? I reply: we are said to receive, obtain, and acquire what, *according as our faith is aware*, is shown forth to us by the Lord, whether when he first testifies to it, or when he confirms more fully and more surely what has been attested, Ananias meant only this: “To be assured, Paul, that your sins are forgiven, be baptized. For the Lord promises forgiveness of sins in baptism; receive it, and be secure.” . . . But from this sacrament, as from all others, we obtain only as much as *we receive in faith*.”⁶

For Calvin, then, baptism is a sign that ordinarily follows faith. Of course, in an elect infant the case is different: faith follows baptism. For an elect infant who doesn’t have faith at the time of their baptism (though Calvin can speak about an infant having a latent faith like that of Jeremiah, David, or John the Baptist⁷), the baptism becomes a means of grace later in life when they do come to faith. The grace which is signified at their baptism is then conferred upon them. But – and this is crucial for understanding Calvin at this point – baptism as a means of grace does not end there. For the elect who are in faith, baptism continues to be a means of grace as they continue to look back at their baptism and strive to improve it⁸. By faith we look back at our baptism and are encouraged. As Calvin says: “The great truth, for example, of our spiritual regeneration, though but once represented to us in baptism, should remain fixed in our minds through our whole life. . .”⁹ Similarly stated, baptism is an ongoing means of grace for the elect. Each time a true believer looks back at his baptism by faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit communicates the grace signified by the sacrament.

Thirdly it confers what it signs and signifies only by the power of the Holy Spirit¹⁰. Calvin writes:

“We must not suppose that there is some latent virtue inherent in the sacraments by which they, in themselves, confer the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon us in the same way in which wine is drunk out of a cup, since the only office divinely assigned them is to attest and ratify the benevolence of the Lord towards us; and they avail

no farther than accompanied by the Holy Spirit to open our minds and hearts, and make us capable of receiving this testimony, in which various distinguished graces are clearly manifested.”¹¹

Just as was mentioned above with reference to the Word of God preached, likewise with baptism: a means of grace may be efficacious at times other than when it is received. The Holy Spirit is sovereign, and so he may or may not confer the grace signed and sealed in baptism at the time of its administration:

“Whatever God offers in the sacraments, depends on the secret operation of the Holy Spirit So far, then, is God from resigning the grace of His Spirit to the sacraments, that all their efficacy and utility are lodged in the Spirit alone Thus the sacraments are effectual only ‘where and whenever God is so pleased.’”¹²

Subsequently Calvin makes the connection explicit between baptism and the Word of God as means of grace:

“As the outward voice of man cannot at all penetrate the heart, it is in the free and sovereign determination of God to give the profitable use of the signs to whom he pleases The external administration of Baptism profits nothing, save only where God pleases it shall.”¹³

In other words, God may confer the grace before the sacrament is administered, or he may confer it at the time of its administration, or he may confer it shortly or long after its administration. In answering Westphal’s teaching that infants who are baptized are always regenerated, Calvin responds, “. . . that the nature of baptism or the Supper must not be tied down to an instant of time.”¹⁴

Fourthly, in connection with what has just been said, the grace which is signified in baptism is not necessarily tied to the sign. God is sovereign and may work with or without the sign, even though he ordinarily works through means. Calvin puts it this way:

“The grace of God is not confined to the sign: so that God may not, if He pleases, bestow it without the aid of the sign. Besides, many receive the sign who are not partakers of grace; for the sign is common to all, to the good and to the bad alike; but the Spirit is bestowed on none but the elect, and the sign, as we have said, has no efficacy without the Spirit.”¹⁵

God may certainly confer the grace signed and sealed by baptism apart from or beside the actual administration of the sacrament. While ordinarily this is not how God works, the doctrine of his sovereignty demands that he not be tied down or restricted to the ordinary use of the means of grace.

III. The Signa and Res

Having addressed the qualifications Calvin makes about the efficacy of Word and sacrament, we move on to develop the relationship between the sign (*signa*) and the thing signified (*res*) with reference to baptism in his thought. For Calvin the relationship between them is so close that, without confusing them, the language of the *res* can be used for the *signa*. In this way, the Reformed and Chalcedonian Christology was helpful as an analogy. As Christ is fully God and fully man – in hypostatic union without separation or confusion – so likewise is the relation between the sign the thing signified.

In other words, there is a “sacramental union” in baptism. What this means is that, between the sign and the thing signified, the names and effects of the one are attributable to the other. In this way, the Bible can speak about baptism as the washing of regeneration ([Titus 3:5](#)) and as that which saves ([1 Peter 3:21](#)). Not because the sign is the thing itself, but because of the sacramental union. The same is the case with Christ. By reason of the unity of his person, that which is proper to one of Christ’s natures is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature. And just as with the two natures of Christ, so with the relation between baptism and regeneration: there is no conversion, confusion, or composition.

Calvin argues that the error of the Roman Church’s doctrine of baptismal regeneration was the confusion of the sign and the thing signified. As we will later see, this is why Calvin can write with language which would lead us to think he is advocating baptismal regeneration – while at the same time vehemently rejecting the Roman doctrine. In so doing, he borrows from Scripture a *duplex loquendi modus*: a “twofold way of speaking” concerning the sacraments¹⁶. This is part and parcel of Calvin’s hermeneutic with reference to certain passages. The exegesis depends on who the audience is that the Scripture is addressing. If the text is addressing believers, often the thing signified will be predicated of the sign. However, if the audience is unbelievers, the text may speak of the signs as “frigid empty figures”¹⁷ Calvin articulates the *duplex loquendi modus* this way:

I answer, it is customary with Paul to treat of the sacraments in two points of view. When he is dealing with the hypocrites, in whom the mere symbol awakens pride, he then proclaims loudly the emptiness and worthlessness of the outward symbol, and denounces, in strong terms, their foolish confidence. In such cases he contemplates not the ordinance of God, but the corruption of wicked men. When, on the other hand, he addresses believers, who make a proper use of the symbols, he then views them in connexion with the truth-which they represent.¹⁸

In sum, Scripture – depending on who is being addressed in the immediate context – can speak of the sacrament in one of two ways. Either it can speak in language which predicates the *res* for the *signa* if the audience is made up of believers (as

in [Titus 3:5](#) and [1 Peter 3:21](#)), or it can speak in a way that emphasizes the distinction between the *res* and *signa* when the spiritual state of the audience is unbelief or questionable. Therefore, since Scripture speaks in two ways about the sacraments (*duplex loquendi modus*), so does Calvin. This understanding of the *duplex loquendi modus* of Scripture will go a long way toward understanding the difficult quotations from Calvin often cited; particularly by those who desire to move his position in the direction of something akin to baptismal regeneration.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Lastly, while we admit that Calvin *did* use language concerning the sacraments which made it sound like he advocated something like baptismal regeneration, we maintain strenuously that he actually rejected such thinking. Rather, what he does do – because of the *duplex loquendi modus* of Scripture – is employ language which is proper of the *res* when speaking of the *signa*. But even in such instances, he makes clear that the sign is not – in fact – the thing signified. This doctrine – forged in the fires of debate with Rome, the Lutheran ubiquitarians, and the Anabaptists – produced a sacramentology which avoided both baptismal regeneration *and* “bare sign” anti-sacramentalism. We would do well to follow the great Reformer in his sacramental theology today.

1. Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine*, pp. 11-13, 16.
2. *Institutes* 4.16.2
3. *Institutes* 4.14.17.
4. This is language drawn of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 10:4 and the *Larger Catechism* 68.
5. *Institutes* 4.14.17, emphasis mine.
6. *Institutes* 4.15.15, emphasis mine.
7. See his argument in *Institutes* 4.16.18-20.
8. A point that is made similarly in the *Westminster Larger Catechism* 167.
9. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* Volume II, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 435. See also *Institutes* 4.15.3.
10. See Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 169-171.

11. *Institutes* 4.14.17.

12. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 169.

13. *Ibid.*, 170

14. John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 2:342.

15. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 320.

16. See Wallace, 173.

17. *Institutes* 4.14.17; quoted in *Ibid.*, 172.

18. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 111.

*This article is an adaptation of the original essay "Calvin and Baptism: Baptismal Regeneration or Duplex Modus Loquendi?" in Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington, eds. *Resurrection and Redemption: Theology in Service of the Church, Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).